

Psychosocial Predictors of Cyberbullying

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Abstract

In adolescence, the intricate web of individual traits, cognitive processes, and social dynamics intertwines to shape behavior. The adolescents who fail to cope up these upheaved emotions struggles with stress and anxiety of inclusion further leading to development of neurotic tendencies. This emotional vulnerability, alongwith moral disengagement, allows individuals to rationalize and justify the harmful actions performed by them, effectively distancing themselves from the moral consequences of cyberbullying. Moreover, peer pressure exerts a powerful influence, as individuals may feel compelled to conform to social norms within their online communities, even if it means engaging in hurtful behaviors towards others. Together, these factors form a complex nexus wherein emotional reactivity, cognitive justification, and social influence converge to foster cyberbullying behaviors. Hence, this study makes an attempt to explore neuroticism, moral disengagement alongwith peer pressure as important predictors of cyberbullying among adolescent students. A total sample of 200 students of senior secondary schools including 100 boys and 100 girls were taken. NEO -FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992), Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura, Barbaranelli & Caprara, 1996), Peer Pressure Scale- Revised (Singh & Saini, 2016), Cyberbullying Perpetration and Cyberbullying Victimization Scales (Lee, Abell, & Holmes, 2015) were administered on the sample. The results of correlation analyses revealed neuroticism, moral disengagement, peer pressure and cyberbullying among adolescent students are significantly correlated with each other. Regression analysis revealed neuroticism, moral disengagement, peer pressure positively and significantly predicts cyberbullying among adolescent students.

Keywords: Neuroticism, Moral Disengagement, Peer Pressure, Cyberbullying

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence represents a pivotal transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. During this period, children experience numerous changes in both body and mind as they approach puberty. They confront a range of issues-social, psychological, cognitive, and physical-while also developing their personal moral framework. This stage is marked by a heightened capacity to interpret social and emotional signals and by a growing reliance on and valuation of interpersonal relationships. During this phase, adolescents are also advancing socially. In stage of adolescence, the formation of identity is the most significant psycho-social development task. They gradually learn to navigate complex social dynamics and interpersonal relations through their interaction with others and this interaction, apart from face-to-face presence, involve them in social media platforms.

In recent years, social media has indelibly itself into our daily lives, even for young adults. After the COVID-19 pandemic, internet and media device usage grew very quickly. Adolescents who were alone themselves on the internet looked through social media, primarily YouTube, Instagram, and Tiktok. As people can share their opinions and sentiments anonymously on social media platforms, adolescents have a yearning to stand out from the crowd, fit in, and be popular, thus making them easier target of bullying at social media platforms. In today's interconnected world, adolescents' reliance on digital communication and social media platforms to navigate their social lives has given rise to a concerning phenomenon: cyberbullying.

But now the major concern is what pushes an adolescent towards cyberbullying? During adolescence there's significant interplay of cognitive and social factors, shaping how individuals perceive themselves, others and their online interactions. Individuals failing to fit in their peer groups often experience intense aversive emotions such as, depression, anxiety, stress, neurosis and hostility. To cope with their own frustrations, these persons more likely engage in cyberbullying behaviors. These neurotic personalities often prioritize short-term relief from negative emotions by involving in morally disengaging behaviors. The perceived detachment of online interactions aggravate moral disengagement by reducing the perceived accountability or consequences of one's actions. The absence of face-to-face contact diminishes feelings of guilt or empathy, makes it easier for persons to detach themselves from impact of their cyberbullying behavior. When these individuals observe their peers participating in cyberbullying as a common practice within social practices, they feel pressure to conform to these behavioral norms in order to maintain their social circle and avoid exclusion. Peer pressure is important in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of persons by affecting perceptions of social norms, providing social validation for aggressive behavior, and reducing feelings of personal accountability. Hence, cyberbullying is greatly influenced by neurotic tendencies, moral disengagement from behaviors and influence of peer pressure.

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying includes the utilization of electronic media to harass, intimidate, or harm other people, and it has become a pervasive issue among adolescents. Cyberbullying can occur 24/7, and can reach victims in their own safe homes and extending the reach and impact of the aggression. Adolescents, in particular, are prone to the cyberbullying effects due to their crucial developmental phase and dependence on social acceptance. This period of life is marked by intense peer relationships, identity formation, and emotional volatility, making these people more vulnerable to the negative consequences of online harassment. Moreover, adolescents growing independence and exploration of their identities may lead them to experiment with different online personas, making them more susceptible to both perpetrating and experiencing cyberbullying. Cyberbullying perpetration means intentionally participating in aggressive actions or harmful behavior towards others by means of digital communication technologies whereas on the other hand, cyberbullying victimization includes experiences of being targeted or harmed by others through online means. Cyberbullying can exploit and exacerbate vulnerabilities associated with neuroticism while simultaneously being fueled by moral disengagement mechanisms. This synthesis underscores the importance of holistic approaches to prevention and intervention that address not only the overt behaviors of cyberbullying but it also includes psychological as well

as ethical factors that lead to its perpetuation. Cyberbullying, a component of cyber-abuse, encompasses online abusive interpersonal behaviors that are overly aggressive in nature (Kowalski et al., 2014). The adolescents are worst victims of this menace due to their developmental stage. The stressful growing environment and malfunctioned cognitive development makes adolescents vulnerable to neurotic tendencies such as anxiety, stress and self-doubt, thus making them more prone to vent out their frustration over others anonymously.

NEUROTICISM

Neuroticism is characterized by consistent predispositions to experience negative emotional reactions when faced with threats, frustrations, or losses. It varies from person to person. Individual's reaction to difficulties ranges from frequent and intense to little emotional reaction. Individuals with neurotic behavioural traits tend to perceive daily routine situations as more distressing or threatening. They may face challenges with regulation of emotions, they worry in excess and normally feel burdened with minor frustrations.

Based on the variability of levels, the neurotic personalities are divided into: High and Low Neuroticism. An individual scoring high on neuroticism may show intense emotional responses alongwith emotional instability. Person may frequently experience irritability in behaviour, severe mood swings, coupled with sadness or worry. The individual who is the low on neuroticism score will be less prone to be affected by these negative emotions and may show less emotional reactivity. These individuals are better in regulation of emotions, more calm.

Hence, from the above discussion it could be concluded that the exploration of neuroticism reveals a multifaceted dimension of personality that encompasses emotional instability, negative affectivity, and vulnerability to stressors. An understanding of neuroticism offers valuable insights into both the vulnerability of individuals to online harassment and their subsequent responses. High levels of Neuroticism may predispose individuals to heightened emotional reactivity, making them more susceptible to the negative effects of cyberbullying, such as anxiety, depression, and stress. Furthermore, neuroticism can exacerbate the impact of cyberbullying, leading to maladaptive coping strategies and persistent emotional distress.

Neuroticism and Adolescence

In adolescence, neuroticism plays an important role in changing emotional experiences, behaviors, overall psychological well-being. The crucial developmental phase is characterized by significant physical, psychological, emotional, and social transformations and neuroticism can influence how an adolescent navigates these transitions. High levels of neuroticism during adolescence are linked with increased vulnerability to feel negative emotions. These emotions can interfere with their ability to adhere to moral standards consistently. Adolescents may have difficulty in regulating their emotions, leading to impulsive or irrational behavior that could result in moral disengagement.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

Moral disengagement is related to set of cognitive mechanisms that unlink the internal moral standards of a person from his/her actions. This facilitates the unethical behavior of a person without feeling distress. It involves a process of cognitive re-construing of the destructive

behavior of a person so that this can be morally accepted without altering the behavior or the moral standards. According to Thornberg et al. (2015), moral disengagement is the capacity to detach morally from wrongdoing by cognitively reinterpreting the circumstances, thereby avoiding negative emotional responses. Moral disengagement is a complex cognitive process deeply rooted in realm of social psychology. At its core moral disengagement involves individuals engaging in mental maneuvers to separate themselves from the ethical consequences of their practical actions. This cognitive restructuring allows individuals to justify or rationalize behaviors that may otherwise can be considered immoral or unethical. These mechanisms can operate individually or in combination, allowing individuals to involve in immoral behavior while sustaining a positive self-image.

Moral Disengagement and Adolescence

In adolescence, moral disengagement can manifest in various ways, such as justifying harmful behaviors, blaming others, or minimizing the consequences of their actions. Adolescents are still developing their moral reasoning skills, making them more susceptible to moral disengagement, especially in situations where peer pressure or social norms influence their behavior. This period of development is crucial for instilling ethical values and promoting empathy and responsibility. Moral disengagement can play an important role in adolescents' perception and engagement in harmful online behaviors. For example, they may rationalize their actions by believing that the anonymity of the internet removes accountability, or they may dehumanize their victims by viewing them as mere avatars or screen names. Additionally, adolescents may minimize the impact of their online actions by dismissing them as "just jokes" or downplaying the emotional harm inflicted on the victim. Moral disengagement can be closely intertwined with peer pressure, particularly during adolescence when social acceptance is highly valued. Adolescents may morally disengage to align their behavior with their peer group's norms or to avoid social exclusion. They may justify unethical actions by attributing them to the influence of their peers rather than taking personal responsibility. Peer refers to the group of individuals of the similar age and when a person's attitude behavior or activities are changed under the influence of peers it is called as peer pressure.

PEER PRESSURE

Peer pressure occurs when one person or a group influences others to adopt the same behaviors or attitudes; this influence can trigger a chain reaction in which an initially affected individual encourages others to follow, producing a domino effect of shared actions and beliefs. Peer pressure can significantly influence neurotic behavior and moral disengagement among adolescents. Peer pressure can exacerbate neurotic behavior by fostering a sense of social comparison and fear of rejection. Adolescents may feel pressured to conform to their peers' standards, leading to heightened anxiety and emotional distress. Additionally, peers who engage in neurotic behaviors themselves can reinforce and perpetuate these tendencies among their social group. Moreover, peer pressure can contribute to moral disengagement by creating social norms that condone or even encourage unethical behavior. Adolescents may feel compelled to justify their actions to maintain social acceptance, leading to moral reasoning that minimizes or ignores the harm caused by their behavior. This can result in a weakening of moral principles and an increased likelihood of engaging in unethical conduct.

Peer Pressure and Adolescence

Adolescents may feel pressured to conform to online behaviors, including cyberbullying, to fit in with their peer group. The desire for acceptance and fear of social exclusion can drive individuals to participate in or passively support cyberbullying actions initiated by their peers. Adolescents often engage in social comparison on social media platforms, where they observe and compare themselves to their peers. This can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or insecurity, leading some individuals to lash out or participate in cyberbullying as one of the way to boost one's own social status and deflect attention from one's own vulnerabilities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There are number of research studies that find direct as well as indirect connection between Cyberbullying, neurotic behavior, moral disengagement and peer pressure.

Bussey, Fitzpatrick, and Raman (2015) surveyed 456 Australian adolescents (aged 12–16) and found moral disengagement as a key determinant of cyberbullying, amplified by high self-efficacy. A meta-analysis by Geel, Goemans, and Vedder (2017) across 29 studies (N > 21,000 adolescents/young adults) revealed small positive correlations between neuroticism and both cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. Ang et al. (2017) studied 396 Singaporean secondary students (aged 12–16) using the NEO-FFI; neuroticism significantly predicted perpetration due to poor emotional regulation, leading to maladaptive online responses. Wang and Yang (2020) analyzed 642 Chinese high schoolers (aged 14–17) and showed moral disengagement fully mediated the negative link between empathy and cyberbullying. Likewise, Shin, Lee, and Kim (2022) examined 514 South Korean teens (aged 13–17), and confirmed that moral disengagement determined cyberbullying after controlling for empathy and gender; low empathy heightened risk. Luo and Bussey (2023) meta-analyzed 157 studies (N = 118,501) linking moral disengagement to rule-breaking, influenced by self-efficacy, empathy, parental supervision, and peer rejection.

Prior researches examine these factors-neuroticism, moral disengagement, and peer pressure-mostly in isolation, overlooking their interplay on adolescents' cyberbullying. Neuroticism fosters emotional distress, moral disengagement justifies aggression, and peer pressure amplifies both via stress and group reinforcement. Adolescence heightens vulnerability due to identity formation and peer sensitivity. This study investigates their combined and individual effects on adolescents' cyberbullying behaviors within an integrated framework.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

During adolescence, the intricate web of individual traits, cognitive processes, and social dynamics intertwines to shape behavior. The adolescents who fail to cope up these upheveled emotions struggles with stress and anxiety of inclusion further leading to development of neurotic tendencies. Neuroticism, characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity and instability, primes individuals to react strongly to perceived threats or slights. This emotional vulnerability, alongwith intellectual process of moral disengagement, permits individuals to rationalize and justify their harmful actions, effectively distancing themselves from the moral consequences of cyberbullying. Moreover, peer pressure exerts a powerful influence, as individuals may feel compelled to conform to social norms within their online communities, even if it means engaging in hurtful behaviors towards others. Together, these factors form a complex nexus wherein emotional reactivity, cognitive justification, and social influence

converge to foster cyberbullying behaviors. Hence, this study makes an attempt to explore neuroticism, moral disengagement and peer pressure as predictors of cyberbullying among adolescents.

Hypotheses

1. Neuroticism, moral disengagement, peer pressure and cyberbullying will be positively and significantly related to one another.
2. Neuroticism will positively and significantly predict cyberbullying among adolescent students.
3. Moral disengagement will positively and significantly predict cyberbullying among adolescent students.
4. Peer pressure will positively and significantly predict cyberbullying among adolescent students.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Method of the Study

The current research falls under the category of descriptive research which is undoubtedly the most popular and wisely used method of research in education.

Sample Used

In current particular study, a total sample of 200 senior secondary school students of Amritsar district including 100 boys and 100 girls respectively.

Psychological Measures Used

Following enlisted tools were used to collect the data for present study:

The NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) is a 60-item questionnaire that assesses five personality domains-, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness-each represented by 12 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) and intended for respondents aged 16 and older. Neuroticism scores (12–60, reverse-coded items 3,6,9,12) reflect emotional instability (higher = more anxiety/stress). Reliability: test-retest > .75. Validity: strong construct, criterion-related (e.g., job performance), convergent/discriminant.

The Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1996) comprises 32 items measuring eight mechanisms (e.g., moral justification, dehumanization) on a 3-point Likert scale (1=Disagree to 3=Agree), with total scores of 32–96 (higher scores reflect stronger justification of unethical acts). It demonstrates good test-retest reliability (.78–.81), construct validity through factor analyses, criterion-related validity for predicting rule-breaking, and convergent validity with emotional instability measures alongside discriminant validity from unrelated traits.

The revised Peer Pressure Scale (Singh & Saini, 2016) includes 25 positively framed items for adolescents aged 16–19, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 to 1 (Strongly Agree to Disagree), yielding total scores of 25–125 (higher = greater peer pressure). Reliability includes

Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$ and test-retest (60 days) = .33, with validity confirmed via face/content assessments and criterion methods—predictive with HIV risk/alcohol scales and concurrent with Brown et al.'s (1986) conformity scale.

The Cyberbullying Perpetration (CBP; 20 items) and Victimization (CBV; 27 items) Scales (Lee, Abell, & Holmes, 2015) total 47 items across verbal/written, visual/sexual, and social exclusion subtypes, using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Not at all to 5=Very often); higher averaged subscale/overall scores indicate greater involvement. Both show excellent reliability (CBP $\alpha = .93$; CBV $\alpha = .95$; subscales $> .73$), convergent validity (CBP with Aggression Questionnaire; CBV with MPVS), and construct validity via confirmatory factor analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Co-relational analysis i.e. Pearson's product moment correlation was utilized to find the relationship between the variables, the dependent variable, cyberbullying was examined in relation to the independent variables, namely neuroticism, moral disengagement and peer pressure among adolescents. The calculated correlation coefficients are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Showing Coefficient of Correlation between Neuroticism, Moral Disengagement, Peer Pressure, Cyberbullying

Correlations			
	Neuroticism	Moral Disengagement	Peer Academic Pressure
Cyberbullying	.676**	.553**	.581**

**P<0.01 level

HYPOTHESIS – 1

Neuroticism, moral disengagement, peer pressure and cyberbullying will be positively and significantly related to one another.

Table 1 shows that the coefficient of correlation of neuroticism with cyberbullying is found to be .676, which is significant at 0.01 level, this further signifies that there exists a strong and positive significant correlation between neuroticism and cyberbullying. Also, the coefficient of correlation of moral disengagement with cyberbullying was calculated to be .553, which is again significant at 0.01 level, indicating there exists a strong and positive significant correlation between the variables. In addition, the coefficient of correlation of peer pressure with cyberbullying is found to be .581, which is also significant at 0.01 level, further indicating high and positive significant relationship between the variables. Hence, the hypothesis 1, is approved.

It implies that neuroticism, moral disengagement and peer pressure positively and significantly correlates with the cyberbullying. A strong and positive connection between neuroticism, moral disengagement, and pressure from peers with cyberbullying indicates that individuals with emotional instability, those who rationalize harmful actions, and those under peer pressure are more inclined to partake in cyberbullying. These characteristics and social influences play a role in both the escalation of bullying behavior and the increase in stress levels.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Regression analysis is utilized to deduce causal links between the predictors and the criterion variables. In the present study, the variables under investigation are neuroticism, moral disengagement, peer pressure, and cyberbullying. So, the significant predictive power of predictor variables was found by applying regression analysis.

Table 2: Showing the Regression Analysis of Neuroticism, Moral Disengagement, Peer Pressure and Cyberbullying

Variables	Cyberbullying						
	b	SE	B	t- value	R	R- square	F
Neuroticism	1.303	18.05	.676	12.921	.676	.457	166.95
Moral Disengagement	.767	20.414	.553	9.344	.553	.306	87.310
Peer Pressure	.639	19.939	.581	10.054	.581	.338	101.08

HYPOTHESIS – 2

Neuroticism will positively and significantly predict cyberbullying among adolescent students.

Neuroticism shows a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship with cyberbullying. The standardized coefficient $B=.676$ indicates that a one standard deviation increase in neuroticism is associated with a .676 standard deviation increase in cyberbullying scores, holding the single-predictor model structure. The high t-value (12.921) and large F statistic (166.95) suggest this effect is highly significant, meaning it is very unlikely to be due to chance variation in the sample.

The correlation $R=.676$ and $R^2=.457$ imply that neuroticism alone explains about 45.7% of the variance in cyberbullying behaviour, which is a large effect in behavioural research. Hence, the hypothesis 2 stands approved. This signifies that individuals with higher levels of emotional instability, anxiety, and sensitivity are more likely to display cyberbullying behaviors. This further implies that neurotic adolescents, who typically have difficulties with emotional regulation and exhibit heightened reactivity to stress, may utilize online platforms as a means to express their negative emotions or frustrations. Their inclination to internalize pressure and react impulsively can result in harmful interactions in online environments.

Alongside these results, additional studies also reinforce the idea that neuroticism is a positive predictor of cyberbullying in adolescents. In a study that involved 1,500 Israeli adolescents, Mesch (2009) discovered that persons with high levels of neuroticism were more prone to both perpetrate and be victims of cyberbullying, as their emotional instability and sensitivity to stress made them more engaged in online aggression. Likewise, Wang et al. (2015)

identified a positive relation between neuroticism and cyberbullying perpetration in a sample of 1,500 adolescents from the U.S., indicating that neurotic individuals, due to their intense emotional responses and trouble managing stress, were more likely to partake in cyberbullying activities.

HYPOTHESIS – 3

Moral disengagement will positively and significantly predict cyberbullying among adolescent students.

Moral disengagement also shows a meaningful and significant positive association with cyberbullying. The standardized beta $B = .553$ indicates that higher moral disengagement is associated with higher cyberbullying involvement, and the t-value (9.344) and F statistic (87.310) show that this association is statistically robust. Here, the correlation $R = .553$ and $R^2 = .306$ suggest moral disengagement accounts for about 30.6% of the variance in cyberbullying, which is a medium-to-large effect.

Hence, the hypothesis 3 is approved. The result indicates that adolescents who often engage in moral disengagement-by rationalizing harmful behavior, blaming the victims, downplaying the effects of their actions, or deflecting responsibility-are considerably more likely to take part in cyberbullying. This further suggests that these individuals can detach themselves from the moral implications of their actions, which diminishes feelings of guilt and enables them to commit online aggression without experiencing inner turmoil. These results stress the important role of moral thinking in influencing adolescents' online conduct. Likewise, Bandura et al. (2001) introduced the idea of moral disengagement, which describes how individuals rationalize unethical actions, including cyberbullying, through mechanisms such as the diffusion of responsibility as well as dehumanization. This concept was subsequently examined in research Kavak et al. (2019) and identified a notable positive relation between moral disengagement and cyberbullying in a sample of 1,000 Turkish adolescents, indicating that those who justified harmful behaviors that were more likely to partake in cyberbullying. Zhao et al. (2017) further substantiated this idea in a study involving 2,000 adolescents of china, where moral disengagement was demonstrated to significantly predict online aggression. Collectively, these studies underscore that moral disengagement allows adolescents to minimize the ethical implications of their actions, thereby heightening the probability of engaging in cyberbullying.

HYPOTHESIS – 4

Peer Pressure will positively and significantly predict cyberbullying among adolescent students.

Peer pressure shows a moderately strong and significant positive relationship with cyberbullying. The standardized coefficient $B = .581$ indicates that as peer pressure increases, cyberbullying behaviour also tends to increase. The t-value (10.054) and F statistic (101.08) again demonstrate statistical significance.

The correlation $R = .581$ and R^2 indicate that peer pressure explains about 33.8% of the variance in cyberbullying, which is substantial. Hence, the hypothesis 4 is approved. The acceptance of the idea that peer pressure significantly and positively influences cyberbullying in adolescents that reflects the intense pressure youth experience from their peers may lead to a

higher probability of engaging in cyberbullying. When students face high expectations from their peers they may feel increased levels of stress, anxiety, or frustration. The established connection indicates that this pressure is not merely a side issue but plays a significant role in promoting negative online conduct. The results are also supported by various research studies like Yildirim et al. (2020) and Kowalski and Limber (2013) discovered that adolescents experiencing high levels of pressure from their peers were more inclined to partake in cyberbullying, as the stress and competition created by peer expectations led to adverse emotional consequences, which subsequently contributed to online aggression.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the current study implies psychological characteristics as well as social influences interact meaningfully, impacting both harmful actions and achievement-driven behaviors. In particular, students who are high on neuroticism can be more inclined to involve in cyberbullying, potentially as a reaction to emotional instability. Likewise, adolescents who exhibit moral disengagement may incline to engage in cyberbullying. Additionally, peer pressure seems to play in increasing participation in cyberbullying.

IMPLICATIONS

This study examines how neuroticism, moral disengagement, and peer pressure predict adolescents' cyberbullying behaviors, offering practical value for education by informing targeted interventions. Teachers can monitor emotionally sensitive students-where neuroticism links to cyberbullying-through training to spot anxiety signs, provide emotional support, and integrate moral reasoning/empathy exercises on online ethics. Educational leaders and stakeholders should implement anti-cyberbullying policies to counter rationalizations, promote collaborative school cultures over competition (mitigating peer pressure's dual role in boosting performance yet fueling aggression), and foster peer support networks. Students benefit from emotional intelligence programs teaching stress management, self-awareness of traits like neuroticism, and responsible online conduct to build healthier coping. Parents and community members can enhance home support via workshops on mental health, digital ethics, and open communication, ultimately aiding holistic adolescent development.

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